

Washington Insight



The Kennedy Style

--Coolth, Not Glamor

— Joseph Kraft

EVERYBODY TALKS about the Kennedy tragedy, the promise of the young President cut off in his prime by the assassination ten years ago. But what was the promise?

I think it was the promise of a cool approach to the central social, economic and foreign policy problems of our time. It was the promise of being spared the false expectations and inevitable counter-reaction, which in fact developed after the assassination.

To understand all this, it is first necessary to say a word about the Kennedy style. "Camelot," with its evocation of something magic, misrepresented what it was all about.

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BUT THE TRUE Kennedy style consisted in down-to-earth things. It was refusing to wear a Stetson or a headdress at political gatherings with cowboys and Indians.

It was laughing at Richard Nixon when he waxed sanctimonious about Harry Truman's profanity. It was what caused even sympathetic critics to charge that the Kennedys lacked heart. It was not glamor. It was coolth.

The cool style expressed a genuine caution, a sense that politics was tough, not easy, which came naturally to a President vulnerable to the charge of inexperience, who had been elected by a minority in the face of ingrained religious prejudice.

In foreign policy, Mr. Kennedy was never a peacenik prone to believe the Communists were the good guys. He thought the hardliners had a point in emphasizing effective defense forces. But the

central line of his policy was clearly the other way. Mr. Kennedy was moving from confrontation to detente, and taking the hardliners with him.

Similarly in social policy, President Kennedy was highly sensitive to the national division on civil rights. He wanted to preserve the support of white Southerners, both in the Congress and the country at large. His feelings found expressions in some of his judgeship appointments, in his constant preference for mediating race conflicts and in the distances he took from civil rights leaders. But when mediation efforts failed, he repeatedly used force to back up the law.

Finally, there was economic policy. President Kennedy feared what the interests opposed to government intervention could do to him. He was slow to move against recession and inflation.

But when he moved, he moved in the right direction. He committed the country to an income policy with wage and price guidelines. The 1963 tax bill, representing the first use of fiscal policy to counter recession, set in motion the record prosperity of the mid-'60s.

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ALL THIS went awry after the assassination. Maybe the reaction which set in in 1968 was written in the national psyche.

But for my own part, I doubt it. I think many of our recent troubles could have been eased, and perhaps avoided, if the course of our political evolution had moved ahead normally. The tragedy of the assassination finds its fullest expression in the pain that has come afterwards.